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AUTHOR McCormack, Edward J.
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will discuss two aspects of communication of utmost consequence in supervision--competence and compassion. Every communication has at least two aspects. One is the content, the information intended. This is the area of competence in communication. The other involves the attitude of the supervisor toward the person to whom the information is directed. This aspect is always communicated--intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly. The highly competent supervisor can be almost a total failure for lack of compassionate communication. We are more generally aware of how to develop competence in people than we are of how to develop compassion in people. There are skills of compassion which can be taught and learned, just as there are skills of competence. Among these skills are: being open to one's own feelings; being constructively honest with other people, as well as to yourself, about what your feelings are; being open to and communicating positive feelings of love, appreciation, respect, and warmth; and being able to manage one's own thoughts and feelings so as to truly listen to another person. Competence and compassion together produce the greatest satisfaction for all concerned. (Author)

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# COMMUNICATION AND THE SUPERVISOR

Edward J. McCormack

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Communication And The Supervisor

In this paper, I will discuss two aspects of communication of utmost consequence in supervision. To refer to these two aspects of communication, I will use Brandewein's terms of "competence" and "compassion." (1)

The need for the competent mode of communication is seen in the development of area-subject supervision. It is essential that one have pertinent knowledge, background, experience and skill in order to communicate helpfully as a supervisor in a given area. Lack of this competence simply precludes competent communication. Such competence exists in degrees with different supervisors. As the different fields of study have developed, it has been increasingly more difficult for one person to practice competent communication in more than one or a few areas, so that special area supervision has developed in which specialists communicate with those being supervised.

Some supervisors think that competence represents the acme of supervisory ability. Once competent communication is developed, however, there is yet another aspect of communication which must be developed: compassionate communication.

1. Brandewein, Paul F., Skills of Compassion and Competence, 1969. ASCD Yearbook, Life Skills in School and Society, Louis J. Rubin, Editor.

Every communication has at least two aspects. One is the content; the information intended. This is the area of competence in communication. The other involves the attitude of the supervisor toward the person to whom the information is directed. This aspect is <u>always</u> communicated: intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly. You have a choice about whether or not to communicate information, but once you do decide to communicate information, you <u>must</u> also communicate an attitude. You have no choice about that. Your only choice is what attitude you will communicate, not whether or not you will communicate an attitude. Your attitude is "telegraphed" in the tone of voice, gestures, choice of words, facial expressions, and in many other verbal and non-verbal ways. This aspect of communication can either facilitate or neutralize the effect of competent communication. This is why it is so important for each of us to examine our attitudes toward the people we are supervising. Those attitudes will be communicated, and we cannot help it. If we <u>feel</u> critical, superior, rejecting, judgemental or condescending, that will be communicated. If we <u>feel</u> accepting, helpful, considerate, tolerant, respectful, or trusting, that will be communicated. If we <u>feel</u> compassionate, we will be accomplishing compassionate communication. I have been emphasizing that compassionate communication is a matter of what we feel. We may believe in equality, democracy, respect, and other positive ideals, but it is not what we believe about our relationship with the person, but what we feel, that communicates. It is often hard for people who believe positive things to recognize that their feelings may not correspond to those positive beliefs in a given moment, so that they are sometimes

blind to what attitude they are communicating. The results of one's communications may be taken as one indicator of whether or not one's attitude was compassionate.

In my opinion, it is this unspoken attitudinal component of every communication that makes the final difference between a truly valuable supervisor and one that is competent only. The highly competent supervisor can be almost a total failure for lack of compassionate communication. In fact, the more competent a person with low compassion is, the more detrimental his competent communications may be because of the total effect of his communications upon the self-worth, motivation, and security of the person being supervised. A person with less competence and more compassion would be preferrable to me. Highly competent persons with low compassion, frequently resent those they are supervising for not bowing gracefully to their insights and observations. Their observations are often excellent in themselves. However, these supervisors do not realize that it is the way they are treating the person while conveying the information which is causing the resistance. And further, the resentment they feel about being resisted also communicates, which amplifies the problem. A negative cycle is created by their own attitudes. They are baffled as to why their competent communications are not having the effect they desire, and they blame the other person. Their answer lies in their lack of compassionate skills. They are hurting, offending, demeaning, frightening, threatening and alienating people attitudinally, while communicating with utmost competency. The more competence they have, the more destructive they are.

I think that I could postulate four basic types of supervisors from the ideas in this discussion:

1. Neither competent, nor compassionate.
2. Competent, but not compassionate.
3. Not competent, but compassionate.
4. Competent and compassionate.

To me, this last category of "competent and compassionate" represents the ideal supervisor. Dinah Crake has described this ideal of competence and compassion in a supervisor. From the view of a person being supervised by such a supervisor, she writes:

> Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible
> Comfort of feeling safe with a person,
> Having neither to weigh thoughts
> Nor measure words--but pouring them
> All right out--just as they are,
> Chaff and grain together,
> Confident that a faithful hand will
> Take and sift them,
> Keep what is worth keeping,
> And with the breath of kindness
> Blow the rest away.

We are more aware of competence as a criteria for good supervision than we are of the criteria of compassion. And, we are more generally aware, I believe, of how to develop competence in people than we are of how to develop compassion in people. And, I think that competence is an easier personal accomplishment for most people than is compassion. Brandewein believes that there are skills of compassion which can be taught and learned, just as there are skills of competence. I agree with him.

I think that one of the primary skills of compassion is that of being open to one's own feelings: to be self-aware. By developing this skill, the supervisor can watch his feelings moment by moment and

take measures, when appropriate, to control them, change them, or deal with them with the person being supervised. Supervisors who are not in touch with their own feelings do not know what they are communicating attitudinally. Therefore, they are often baffled and frustrated by the results. Supervisors who are in touch with themselves are able to maximize the potential for good in their positive feelings and also to handle their negative feelings in positive ways so that they, and the people they are supervising, experience a great deal more satisfaction together.

Another important skill is that of being constructively honest with other people, as well as to yourself, about what your feelings are. This is a skill that can be learned after one has learned how to be in touch with himself. This skill involves some risk, especially while one is learning it, but that is part of what is to be learned: how and when to be honest with one's feelings without alienating. Certainly, if one has negative feelings, those feelings will communicate anyway. Therefore, skills for handling them more openly need to be learned and practiced.

Another related skill of compassion is the ability to be open to and to communicate positive feelings of love, appreciation, respect, and warmth. Many people are aware of such feelings within themselves, but feel reserved and awkward about expressing them. There are skills for expressing and handling these feelings just as there are skills for expressing and handling the negative feelings. All of us are able to increase our skill in developing others by more fully expressing the positive feelings we have about them.

Another skill of compassion is to be able to manage one's own thoughts and feelings so as to truly listen to another person. Most people can only listen to another person for a short time because what they are hearing or seeing soon triggers an idea or feeling within them which distracts them from what they are listening to. Putting those personal thoughts and feelings aside for the moment, or handling them appropriately in the moment, are also skills of compassion which can be learned.

I think that there are means today whereby a person can learn the skills of compassion, or improve them, if he so desires. I think that personal counseling, involvement in encounter groups, private meditation and introspection, and involvement in service to others can all help. I have one qualification to add: I think that much counseling and encounter group work is ineffective, and occasionally even detrimental on the same principle discussed here. That is, it is competent counseling and group work, but not compassionate. Therefore, if one seeks personal counseling or encounter group experience, he should seek those services and experiences from persons known to be compassionate as well as competent. For, after all, the finest way to learn the skills of compassion is from someone who is treating you compassionately. I think that most counselors and supervisors are competent; but that a smaller number of them are as compassionate as they are competent. I think that each of us, as counselors and supervisors, should have the personal goal of being competent in our performance and compassionate in our feelings in all the roles we play which affect other people. Competence and compassion together produce the greatest satisfaction for all concerned.